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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study was made of changes in preschool children's perception of classmates as a result of a multicultural educational experience in a classroom integrated by social class and race. Twenty-four pre-kindergarten children were interviewed with the Photodoll Sociometric Instrument to gain information on their choice of playmates and peer models, and on their perceptions of peers showing positive and negative behavior. Social class and race were significant factors in the choice of playmates and peer models in the fall, but these effects were reduced by spring. Low income and ethnic minority children were more frequently named for showing negative behavior both in the fall and spring. The study suggests that children are reacting more to behavior in rejecting a child than to an awareness of his social class or race. (Author/DP)

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Abstract

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PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF EACH OTHER IN A MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

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Many Americans believe that if racial and socioeconomic integration is to be achieved in our society, it must begin with young children. Preschool children supposedly have few of the prejudices and fears of older children and adults. Therefore, it should be relatively easy to bring together all kinds of children in a truly integrated program from which everyone can benefit. Recent research refutes this assumption; young children of four and five are quite selective in social situations, and generally choose children similar to themselves as their friends (Proshanky, 1966). Yet, situations can be created in which children learn to like and value children different from themselves in race, ethnicity, and social class. In a multicultural educational setting, where children are respected and valued as individuals, we can document the development of growing acceptance of each other as individuals and the decline of stereotypes based on race or social class. Preliminary research on one such program is presented here, in the hope that more truly integrated classrooms can be developed and more learned about the many variables influencing multicultural education.

Since 1966, the Palo Alto Unified School District has operated a preschool program integrated by race and social class. Palo Alto is an upper middle class suburban community with only two percent of the population in the low income range. The program, called the Pre-Kindergarten

Project, is supported by Federal ESEA Title I Funds and California State Compensatory Preschool Funds for low income children. Children of middle income families are included through parents' fees and the support of the Department of Adult Education. The ratio between the two groups has been approximately one-third middle income to two-thirds low income children. Children from various ethnic backgrounds--White, Black, Mexican, Asian Indian, Oriental--have been included in both income groups.

In past years, the evaluation of the effectiveness of the integrated Pre-Kindergarten Project has been limited to achievement, as measured by the Caldwell Preschool Inventory and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Both middle income and low income children improved significantly in test scores, but the median of the posttest for the low income was still less than the median pretest for the middle income (Rogaway and Keepes, 1972). This large discrepancy between the two income groups partly results from our middle income children being drawn from a population that is above average in ability. Over half of the Palo Alto students score above the 75 percentile in ability on national standardized achievement tests. Thus, our low income children are more disadvantaged in relation to our middle income population than they would be in a more average community.

We have been dissatisfied with limiting our evaluation to achievement measures because such measures ignore the other important aspect of the program--the effectiveness of racial and social class integration. By providing our mixed population with a multicultural school experience, the Project aims to discourage the development of racial and social stereotypes and to increase acceptance of multicultural differences among children.

During the six years of operation, the Pre-Kindergarten Project in Palo Alto has developed a curriculum which tries to deepen each child's understanding of himself, his family, and his immediate community. Recognition of the child's cultural background is achieved through the use of a variety of materials to encourage growth in multicultural understanding. The Amazing Life Games Theatre developed by Ethel Young, Supervisory teacher of the Pre-Kindergarten Project, forms an important part of the curriculum. The materials, a collection of activities, emphasize pretending behavior--the trying out of different identities and roles which enable each child to develop increasing awareness of his own competencies and those of others. All of the parents are encouraged to be involved in the Project through participation in the classroom, discussion groups, and social activities. Built into the design are many levels of family involvement so that the social interests of the children are encouraged to extend beyond the classroom.[1]

Related Studies

There is considerable evidence that children develop racial awareness in the preschool years, often as early as three years. Proshansky (1966) concluded from a review of the literature on ethnic awareness that "children roughly between the ages of four and seven-eight become increasingly aware of racial and other kinds of ethnic differences . . . and show a persistent, although changing tendency to accept and reject individuals on ethnic grounds." (p. 320).

Research on the effects of social class on friendship patterns indicates that school children tend to be attracted to other children in their own or higher social class. Also, pupils from higher social classes are liked more than those from lower social classes (Glidewell, 1966). Since

the behavior of children from different social classes varies considerably, it is not clear whether children choosing companions are responding to a child's behavior or to their knowledge of his social class.

Very little research on the culture and social structure of preschool classrooms has been attempted due to methodological limitations. However, the development of a picture sociometric technique reported by McCandless (1957) which yielded valid and reliable data suggests one possible method to measure the social status of preschool children. Supportive evidence is also provided by Vietze and Sigel (1971). They used observational data as well as a picture sociometric technique to study the effects of mixing four year olds differing in race and social class. Middle income children were chosen significantly more often as playmates and lower class Black children were underchosen. Vietze and Sigel concluded that contact in a classroom was not sufficient to counteract the development of racial stereotypes and they suggested that efforts must be made to facilitate the development of positive attitudes in mixed classrooms.

Palo Alto Study

During 1971-1972, we studied the effects of the integrated Pre-Kindergarten Project upon the children's perception of each other. Our initial hypothesis was that increased interracial and social class contact in a multicultural setting would increase acceptance of multicultural differences and reduce stereotypes based on class and race. The study was exploratory due to the small sample and the experimental stage of the measuring instrument.

Method

The subjects consisted of 24 children in Ethel Young's pre-kindergarten class. Eight children were middle income and sixteen were low income

(roughly defined by family income, father's occupation, and parent education). Five of the middle income children were Caucasian, one Asian Indian, and two Black. In the low income group, three were Caucasian, five Black, one Oriental and seven Spanish surname. Thus, the same consisted of eight Caucasians, seven Blacks, and nine categorized as Other (Spanish surname, Asian Indian, Oriental). The low income children were selected on the basis of limited income and educational need. The middle income children were selected on the basis of the interest of the parents in a multicultural experience and the absence of any obvious physical or behavior problems. There was an equal distribution of boys and girls. Mean age at the beginning of the year was 4.3. The middle income group remained stable throughout the year, but there was some mobility in the low income group. Four children, one Caucasian and three Spanish surnames left during the year and were replaced by one Caucasian and one Black. Children attended the pre-kindergarten for three and a half hours each day, five days a week for nine months.

Each child was individually interviewed twice during the year, in October and in May by Margaret Shoenhair. Children were taken at random from the class to a separate room for an interview which took about 10 to 15 minutes. The interview consisted of the administration of the Photodoll Sociometric Instrument. Photodolls of each child in the class (developed by Ethel Young for The Amazing Life Games Theatre) were arranged alphabetically on a flannel board. Photodolls are full body photographs enlarged to 5 by 8 inches and cut in the shape of a paper doll. First, the child was asked to name all the children on the flannel board. If the child did not know a name or gave an incorrect one, the correct name was supplied. Then he was asked to respond to questions asked by the

interviewer. In responding to the questions, the child needed only to point to the photodoll on the board; oral responses were frequent but not necessary.

Our interview form covered three areas:

1. Playmate acceptance or rejection--who do you like to play with, who don't you like to play with.

2. Choice of peer model--who would you like to be, who wouldn't you like to be.

3. Perception of positive and negative behavior--who shares toys, who cries a lot. (See Table 5 for complete list of behaviors.

The teacher and two teacher aides were also asked to respond to the questions dealing with children showing positive and negative behavior in order to gain some information on the accuracy of the children's perception of each other.

Results

Chi Square analysis of the data for the two variables--social class (middle income, low income) and race (Black, Caucasian, Other) gave the following results:

Playmate Acceptance and Rejection

Tables 1 and 2 show the pattern in choice of playmate by class and race. Initially, low income children were more often rejected as playmates than middle income children and this trend continued to be seen at the end of the year, but it was no longer statistically significant. This change was caused by a few children who previously had rejected a child but during the posttest responded "nobody" or shook their heads to the question "who don't you like to play with."

Race was a significant factor in determining choice of playmate through the year. Caucasians were preferred to Blacks and other ethnics, and these

minorities were more often rejected as playmates with little change from Fall to Spring.

Choice of Peer Model

Tables 3 and 4 show choice of peer model by class and race. Children significantly rejected low income children as peer models both at the beginning and at the end of the year. Caucasian children were chosen twice as often in comparison to the other two groups and the ethnic minority children were rejected just as often, but this did not quite reach a level of significance.

Perception of Children's Positive and Negative Behavior

Table 5 shows the pattern of children's perception of peer behavior. There was no evidence that class and race were factors in selecting children for positive behavior. However, as can be seen from Table 5, Caucasians were mentioned more often than Blacks and Others as showing positive behavior.

There were significant class and race factors in selecting peers who showed negative behavior at the beginning and at the end of the year. Low income children were overwhelmingly chosen for negative behavior on the pre- and posttests. The evidence is so strong from the raw tabulations on Table 5 that there is really no need for statistical analysis. The low income children are perceived by themselves and the middle income as the ones who cry a lot, hit a lot, don't share toys, don't listen to the teacher, can't run or climb very well, don't make good pictures, and are not quiet at rest time. These perceptions did not change during the school year. Blacks and other ethnics were consistently associated with negative behavior. The three members of these minorities who were in the middle income group did not balance out the perceived negative behavior

Table 6 shows the influence of race on two positive behaviors--being strong and being smart. Blacks were chosen as strongest on the pretest whereas Caucasians were considered the smartest. On the posttest, these differences disappeared.

Teachers' Responses

The responses of the three teachers to the questions dealing with positive and negative behavior was not statistically analyzed due to the small sample and the tendency of the teachers to name more than one child for some behaviors. Choices for specific behaviors were combined and Table 7 shows the total number of children mentioned for positive and negative behavior.

The teachers' responses show a strong similarity to the children's responses to the same questions on peer behavior. Class did not appear to be a factor in the choice of children for positive behavior, but Caucasians were chosen more often for positive behavior. Teachers reported low income children and Blacks showed more negative behavior during the pre- and posttests.

Discussion

This exploratory study on the effect of integration on preschool children's perception of each other suggests the following conclusions:

1. Social class and race were significant factors in initially determining the children who were rejected as playmates. Low income children and Blacks were most often rejected. Social class ceased to be a significant factor during the year, but race continued to be associated with the children who were rejected at the end of the school year.

2. Social class was a significant factor in the rejection of children chosen as peer models throughout the year. Low income children were

most often rejected as peer models. Initially, Caucasians were most often selected as peer models, but this tendency had diminished by Spring.

3. Social class and race were significant factors in the selection of children associated with negative behavior. Low income children, Blacks and Other minorities were more often associated with negative behavior throughout the year.

It is clear that social class and race are factors to be considered in understanding peer acceptance and rejection at the preschool level but they become less important factors after seven months of integrated school experience. The children's responses suggest that they react more to a behavior in rejecting a child than to an awareness of the child's social class or race. When asked why they rejected a particular classmate, children would most often describe an aggressive act committed by the child. Only once was skin color mentioned as a basis for rejection.

Evidence exists (Deutsch, 1968) that low income children more often show such behavior as hitting and not listening to the teacher. In this research, formal observational data are lacking, but the teachers commented that there seemed to be more aggressive low income children in this group than in previous years. Actually, four low income children were mentioned by the children two to four times more frequently than any other for showing negative behavior. Also, these results are no doubt strongly influenced by the bias in the selection of middle income children. Middle income children with known behavior problems are not considered for the Project so that the teachers can better meet the needs of the low income group.

Our data suggest some awareness of racial stereotypes as the children initially perceived Blacks as stronger and Caucasian children as more

intelligent. Apparently, subsequent contact and play experience altered these perceptions.

The results of this study do indicate that the Pre-Kindergarten Project is successful in increasing acceptance of children from different class and racial backgrounds although it does not eliminate racial and social class bias in peer rejection. It is probably too much to expect that seven months of integrated school experience is sufficient to counteract the development of race and social class stereotypes which are prevalent in the society at large. Elementary school experience should reinforce the growth in positive attitudes during the preschool years.

Furthermore, the study suggests that children's behavior is the critical factor in determining peer acceptance and rejection or the teachers' verbal or non-verbal approval of acceptable behavior, rather than the child's awareness of social class and race. When specific behaviors and abilities become associated with a particular social class or race, racial and social class stereotypes develop. The Pre-Kindergarten Project by selecting middle income children who are above average in intelligence and behavior, creates a situation in which negative behavior is largely exhibited by the low income children. The middle income group in this sample represented only one third of the total sample, yet they were chosen as often as the low income children for positive behavior.

This exploratory study has been limited to one preschool classroom and the findings are only suggestive and require further investigation with a larger sample. We need observational data of children's interactions during the year to discover if children's play patterns actually reflect the responses of the children to the Photodoll Sociometric

Instrument. Are the middle income children more actively sought as playmates? Do the low income children show the most negative behavior? How do the teachers respond verbally and non-verbally to positive and negative behavior shown by the children? Periodic observation during the year would provide a more complete picture of the process of integration.

The Photodoll Sociometric Instrument described in the study appears to be valuable in measuring children's perception of each other as well as in measuring the effectiveness of integration in a multicultural classroom. The technique is simple and can be used with children as young as four. Teachers should find the technique useful in studying the social structure of their classroom, the status of individual children, and the success of their methods in influencing children's perception and acceptance of each other.

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Footnotes

1. These and other aspects of the program are described in reports listed in the Reference section (Rogaway and Keepes, 1971, 1972; Young, 1965, 1971).

Table 1

Playmate Acceptance and Rejection According to Social Class

Social Class	Pretest		Posttest	
	Like	Don't Like	Like	Don't Like
Middle Income	13	4	10	4
Low Income	8	17	9	13
Chi Square	6.33		2.09	
P	< .02		N.S.	

Table 2

Playmate Acceptance and Rejection According to Race

Race	Pretest		Posttest	
	Like	Don't Like	Like	Don't Like
Black	4	10	4	9
Caucasian	13	3	11	3
Other	4	8	4	5
Chi Square	10.15		6.05	
	< .01		< .05	

Note: Figures in each column represent the number of children from a particular social class or race mentioned by the subjects.

Table 3

Choice of Peer Model According to Social Class

	Pretest		Posttest	
Social Class	Want to Be	Don't Want to Be	Want to Be	Don't Want to Be
Low Income	8	17	9	13
Middle Income	13	4	10	4
Chi Square	4.07		5.69	
P	< .05		< .05	

Table 4

Choice of Peer Model According to Race

	Pretest		Posttest	
Race	Want to Be	Don't Want to Be	Want to Be	Don't Want to Be
Black	5	7	6	10
Caucasian	10	5	8	4
Other	5	11	5	8
Chi Square	4.63		2.16	
P	NS		NS	

Table 5

Children's Perception of Peers Showing Positive and Negative Behavior

	Positive Behavior								Negative Behavior								
Class and Race	Happiest	Strongest	Smartest	Shares Toys	Listens to Teacher	Listens to Stories	Makes Good Pictures	Total	Cries a Lot	Hits a Lot	Doesn't Share Toys	Doesn't Listen to Teacher	Can't Run or Climb Very Well	Doesn't Make Good Pictures	Not Quiet at Rest-time	Total	Chi Square Test
Pretest																	
Low Income	9	21	11	10	7	10	11	79	18	19	18	18	10	14	20	117	$x^2 = 30.15$
Middle Income	11	0	10	10	14	9	10	64	3	1	3	2	5	5	0	19	$p < .001$
Black	4	16	4	2	5	5	7	43	13	10	13	13	8	6	8	71	$x^2 = 43.52$
Caucasian	10	3	10	14	12	6	6	71	1	2	1	2	3	4	2	15	$p < .001$
Other	6	2	7	4	4	8	8	39	7	7	7	5	4	9	10	49	
Posttest																	
Low Income	7	12	9	11	9	7	6	61	16	17	16	17	11	14	11	102	$x^2 = 41.98$
Middle Income	13	5	9	7	9	8	11	62	2	2	1	1	1	1	4	12	$p < .001$
Black	8	8	7	7	5	2	4	41	13	8	3	10	6	12	6	58	$x^2 = 23.70$
Caucasian	9	6	8	8	7	6	9	53	2	2	3	2	4	1	4	18	$p < .001$
Other	3	3	2	4	4	6	2	24	3	9	8	6	2	4	7	39	

Note: Figures in each column represent the number of peers from a particular class or race chosen by all subjects for a behavior.

Table 6

Children's Perception of the Strongest and Smartest Peers According to Race

Race	Pretest		Posttest	
	Strongest	Smartest	Strongest	Smartest
Black	16	4	8	7
Caucasian	3	10	6	8
Chi Square	8.25		.037	
p	< .01		NS	

Table 7

Teachers' Perception of Children Showing Positive and Negative Behavior

	Pretest		Posttest	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Low Income	36	47	22	37
Middle Income	38	7	10	9
Black	16	35	13	31
Caucasian	36	5	25	4
Other	22	16	4	10

Note: See Table 5 for description of positive and negative behavior.

About the Authors

Jacqueline Rapier, Ph.D., is an elementary school psychologist in the Palo Alto Unified School District and has provided guidance services to the Pre-kindergarten Project for the past four years.

Margaret Shoenhair, M.A., was a parent of a child enrolled in the Pre-kindergarten Project in a previous year, and she is now an instructor of Anthropology at West Valley College, Saratoga, California.

Ethel Young, M.A., has been the supervisory teacher of the Pre-kindergarten Project since its inception, and she is the originator and principal consultant of the Houghton-Mifflin Early Childhood Program The Amazing Life Games Theatre.